

The fight for equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals is the next front in America's struggle for civil rights.

The milestones of America's progress have marked fights for equal rights, liberty, and justice for all. The enduring struggle - to grant women the right to vote, to end Jim Crow, to provide opportunity and accessibility to individuals with disabilities - helps define who we are as a nation.

The tragedy of Tyler Clementi's death - like the suicides of three other teens in three other states whose deaths reportedly are linked to anti-gay bullying and abuse - is part of that struggle.

There is so much of this story that is tragic, foremost the loss of a promising young man and musician with his whole life ahead of him.

It also is a tragic reminder that the rights of LGBT Americans are still threatened - still discriminated against in the workplace, thrown out of the military, and as we have seen, bullied at school.

Underlying this discrimination are those who define LGBT individuals as "Them" instead of "Us." Just this week a prominent Senator said gays and lesbians should be forbidden from teaching in our schools. An assistant attorney general in Michigan used a blog to attack the openly gay student body president at his alma mater, calling him a "radical homosexual activist."

This discrimination is more than about losing a promotion in the workplace or being discharged from service or being intimidated at school. It takes a real, personal toll. This discrimination has the effect of attacking a whole group of Americans and it must end.

Across the nation, there are thousands like Tyler Clementi who are suffering in silence. As a society, are we serving them well? Do they feel part of our communities?

Barbara Jordan, the late trailblazing Representative from Texas once asked, "How do we create

a harmonious society out of so many kinds of people? The key is tolerance, the one value that is indispensable in creating community." Then we must go beyond tolerance to acceptance and appreciation.

I have been moved by the response to this tragedy and the call for "compassion, empathy, and human dignity" in the words of Tyler's parents. A national conversation about tolerance, acceptance, respect, and a heightened sense of support for LGBT individuals will have a positive impact.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless." In the aftermath of these tragedies, there has been a renewed effort to pass anti-bullying legislation, such as a bill I support to bar discrimination against LGBT students in elementary and secondary schools. Introduced by U.S. Rep. Jared Polis, myself, and 124 others in Congress, the Student Non-Discrimination Act would provide victims of bullying and intimidation with meaningful and effective remedies. This would have a positive impact.

Our nation has made strides in ensuring equality for LGBT Americans, but the civil rights struggle continues. To help prevent such awful, unspeakable tragedies like the one at Rutgers, LGBT Americans must know they live in a society that accepts them for who they are.

Laws must and will change, but so must hearts and minds. That takes individuals and communities speaking up and demonstrating tolerance of our neighbors - something we certainly have seen in the past week.

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You may want to pass along to friends, families, and coworkers the contact information for national, well-regarded 24 hours a day, 7 days a week confidential support organizations:

**Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-TALK**

**The Trevor Lifeline (866) 4-U-TREVOR**

**National Hopeline Network (800) 442-HOPE**